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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Konferenzbeitrag / conference paper

The Effect of Interviewer Persuasion Strategies on Refusal Rates in Household Surveys

PATRICK STURGIS AND PAMELA CAMPANELLI

Abstract: *Our analysis focuses on the extent to which there is scope for reducing rates of refusal on large-scale household surveys below current standard levels. Our data consisted of over 300 tape-recorded doorstep interactions, drawn from substantive surveys at two different organisations. Tape-recorded interactions were classified in terms of the degree of reluctance expressed by the respondent and the consequent scope for the interviewer to deploy interpersonal skills and persuasion. Interactions where there was both reluctance and scope for persuasion were classified according to whether they resulted in cooperation or refusal and the interviewer tactics associated with the two types of outcome were compared. Conclusions are drawn about the prevalence of different types of interaction and the scope for reducing refusal rates through training interviewers to use techniques likely to minimise refusals on the doorstep.*

Keywords: *reluctance; tailoring; response rates; interviewers; persuasion.*

1 Introduction

It has long been recognised that the job of the survey interviewer is the vital nexus between the survey organisation and address residents and much has been written about survey interviewing (see, for example, Hyman 1954, 1975, Kahn and Cannell 1957, Sudman and Bradburn 1974, Dijkstra and Van der Zouwen 1982, Fowler and Mangione 1990). What has received less attention is the impact of the interviewer on survey nonresponse. A few studies have looked at the physical characteristics and attributes of interviewers and have suggested that under certain circumstances factors such as interviewer gender, manner of dress, and vocal characteristics can make a difference to how the respondent views the interviewer (see, for example, Oksenberg et al. 1986, Fowler and Mangione 1990, Morton-Williams 1993). Studies have also investigated the role of a number of different interviewer personality and attitude variables on both individual response rates and the interview data obtained. Singer and Kohnke-Aguirre (1979), for example, have shown that interviewer beliefs about item sensitivity can

significantly predict the likelihood of their obtaining or failing to obtain responses on those items. Perhaps the most popular approach of study, however, has been the consideration of interviewer behaviour during the initial request for survey participation. For example, early research experimented with varying the content of what the interviewer said 'on the doorstep' (Dillman et al. 1976, O'Neil et al. 1980, Couper and Groves 1991) and later research explored the applicability to survey research of the principles of the psychology of compliance, helping behaviour, and opinion change (Groves et al. 1992). Empirical data clearly suggest that interviewer response rates correlate positively with years in the job (Durbin and Stuart 1951, Colombo 1983, Lievesley 1986, Couper and Groves 1991). Although this finding is confounded with interviewers' self-selection to remain as interviewers, one inference that can be drawn is that experienced interviewers' success derives from their 'larger number of combinations of behaviours proven to be effective for one or more types of householders' (Groves et al. 1992, p 478-9).

This paper describes analyses conducted on a sample of tape-recorded doorstep interactions from two large face-to-face interview surveys. Transcribed interactions are coded to a 6 category coding frame in order to explore interviewer persuasion strategies and to assess what scope there is for reducing the refusal component of nonresponse through improved interviewer doorstep technique.

2 Methods

Our doorstep experiment involved 32 face-to-face interviewers from two different UK organisations: Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR) and the NOP Research Group. The interviewers were selected to allow for geographic spread (but excluding Scotland so as to minimise travel and hotel costs) and to allow for a range of experience levels. The interviewers in the two organisations were working on two rather different types of surveys. The NOP interviewers were working on the Political Tracking survey which is a face-to-face paper and pencil (PAPI) survey. In the Political Tracking survey, one person per household was interviewed as pre-selected from a probability sample of the electoral register. Thus, the NOP interviewers were after a pre-named individual. The SCPR interviewers were working on the Family Resources Survey (FRS), an extremely detailed computer assisted personal interview (CAPI) financial survey in which all adult members of the household participate.

Small portable tape-recorders were used for the taping. Interviewers were instructed to approach the household with the tape-recorder switched on and positioned on their clip board. In carrying it in this way, they neither concealed the tape-recorder nor drew the respondent's attention to it.

2.1 Data obtained

The average response rate for the selected interviewer areas was 61[1] percent for the Political Tracking survey and 72 percent for the FRS. For the Political Tracking survey 256 households were to have doorstep introductions recorded and at least one useable tape was received for 207 of these. The respective figures for the FRS were 192 and 146.

For households in the tape-record condition, interviewers were instructed to record all calls on the household until an interview was achieved. This resulted in 401 individual taped calls for the Political Tracking survey and 447 individual calls for the FRS. All tapes were then transcribed verbatim.

3 The coding frame for interaction types

The primary (but by no means only) measure of the efficacy of an interviewer's doorstep approach at a sample unit is whether it results in an interview or a refusal at the address. Non-contacts are excluded as they afford no chance for persuasion. Deadwood is also excluded. This, then constitutes the first basis on which transcripts were coded - *interview/refusal.*

Within each of these categories (interview/refusal) it was possible for there to have been an opportunity for the interviewer to use a persuasion strategy or not. So *'opportunity yes/no'* became the first sub-division within the superordinate category of interview/refusal. In defining what constitutes an 'opportunity' to persuade we decided (as we attempted to throughout the analysis) to adopt a liberal definition, erring on the side of false positives rather than false negatives. Thus anything that the address resident said during any of the interactions, across calls that could be interpreted as expressing some form of reluctance[2] to participate was coded as presenting an opportunity for the interviewer to persuade. Thus, even interactions in which address residents merely asked how long the interview would take before agreeing or said that they were too busy at present but were prepared to participate, were coded as presenting the interviewer with an 'opportunity' to persuade.

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[1] The overall response rate was 67 per cent for Political Tracking and 69 per cent for the joint ONS/SCPR FRS.

[2] In this context, 'expressing some form of reluctance' does not include cases in which the reluctance expressed by the address resident is so strong that it does not provide the interviewer with any opportunity to persuade. For example an address resident slamming the door in an interviewer's face before the interviewer has completed their initial introduction, although a clear expression of reluctance, would not be coded as presenting an opportunity for the interviewer to persuade but would rather be coded as a refusal which presented no opportunity for the interviewer to persuade.

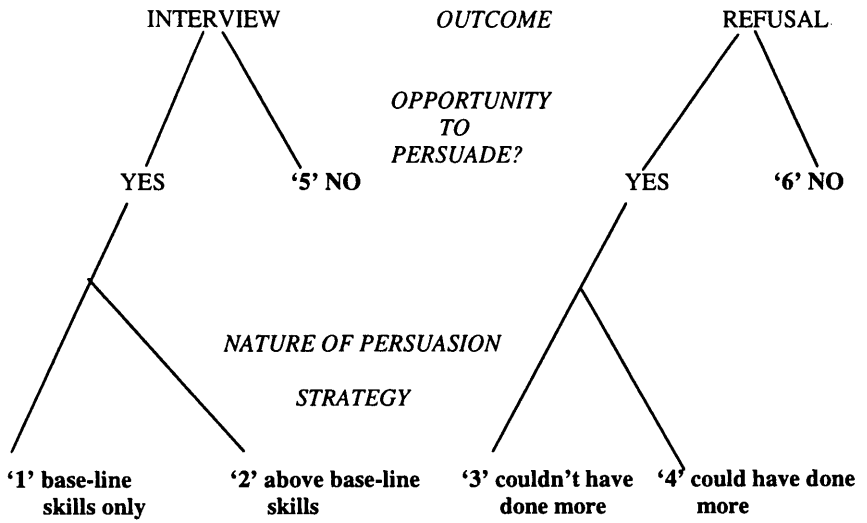
Within the sub-category of 'opportunity yes/no' it was also possible to subdivide cases on the basis of how the interviewer responded to the opportunity. So *'nature of persuasion'* became the sub-division within 'opportunity yes/no'. Four different codes were used to describe the nature of the persuasion. Which of these four codes applied was firstly dependent on whether the outcome at the address was an interview or a refusal.

Where the outcome was an interview: the application of the code depended on the level of persuasion skill that the interviewer had demonstrated in the interaction. At this point we also developed the idea of a 'base-line' skill level for interviewers. The basis of this idea is that there are certain fundamental elements of an interviewer's job which even very new and inexperienced interviewers would be expected to be able to execute. These include: being able to answer basic questions about the length of the interview; the topic of the survey; the selection procedure; arranging appointments etc. As we are primarily interested in studying the potential reduction in refusal rates *below current levels through improved interviewer persuasion technique*, it is not really in such 'base-line' skills that our interest lies. Rather, it is in assessing the extent of and examining the features that characterise interactions in which the skills demonstrated by the interviewer fall either above or below 'base-line' levels.

Therefore, if the interviewer had demonstrated only 'base-line' persuasion skills in obtaining an interview, the transcript was coded '1'. If, however, the persuasion skills contained elements over and above base-line levels and an interview was achieved, the transcript was coded '2'. Where a code '1' is applied as opposed to a '2' it should not necessarily be taken to mean that there was a short-coming in the interviewer's approach but rather that 'base-line' skills were all that were required in order to 'persuade' the address resident to participate on that occasion.

Where the outcome of the call was a refusal: Rather than simply denoting whether base-line skills or above had been used by the interviewer during the interaction, in the case of a refusal the codes refer to whether the interviewer *could have done more* to persuade the address resident to participate. When the outcome at an address is a refusal then the code '3' means that the interviewer said and did all that would be expected of them in terms of standard interviewer training guidelines in attempting to avoid the refusal. The code '4' on the other hand denotes cases in which, again from the perspective of standard interviewer training guidelines, alternative/better persuasion strategies from the interviewer could have been used. Or, in other words, the '4' code applies to interactions in which the interviewer dropped below baseline skill levels. The basic structure of the coding frame is represented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of coding frame for interaction types



This yields *six* distinct categories into which interactions can be coded (indicated in bold in Figure 1). Incorporating an 'other' category for transcripts where there is insufficient information for the transcript to be coded gives a final total of seven. [3]

3.1 Descriptions of interaction types

Each of the interaction types shown in Figure 1 is described in more detail below.

Interaction type 1 (Interview - baseline skills only): These interactions are characterised by address residents who require only a small degree of persuasion before agreeing to be interviewed. Typically such interactions consist of an interviewer's initial introduction followed by the address resident either:

- expressing a wish for time delay - they are too busy to give an interview at the present moment but suggest, or at least do not discount the possibility, that an interview will be given at some future point in time.

[3] Transcripts were coded 'other' when all or significant sections of interviewer-address resident interactions were not recorded - providing insufficient information to determine the correct code.

- asking for further information about the nature of the request being made of them (interview length; survey topic; sponsoring organisation; confidentiality).

Type 1 interactions conclude in an interview after the interviewer either arranges an appointment for another occasion (and gets the interview then) or answers the address resident's request for further information etc. and gets the interview immediately.

Interaction type 2 (Interview - above baseline skills): These interactions represent situations in which the address resident demonstrates at least a fairly high degree of reluctance but nevertheless agrees to participate because the interviewer responds effectively to their concerns over participation. Had the interviewer been unable to respond so effectively, the expressed reluctance of the address resident may have led to a refusal.

Interaction type 3 (Refusal - couldn't have done more): Interactions of this type are characterised by address residents who express reluctance to participate and despite relevant and competent attempts by the interviewer to persuade them, nevertheless refuse to be interviewed. Expressions of reluctance in this category are more often characterised by a general reluctance to participate (too busy in general; not interested in general; not interested in topic; often multiple combinations of aforesaid) than by time-delay statements and requests for more information. Address residents in this category are similar in terms of reluctance to those in category 6 (see below) but are perhaps more concerned to be polite in refusal without ever having a significantly greater intention of participating.

Interaction type 4 (Refusal - could have done more): Type 4 interactions are situations in which the address resident demonstrates a similar level of reluctance as described in type 2 interactions (above) but with the difference that the interviewer fails to adequately allay the address resident's concerns and consequently loses the interview. It is likely that this type of interaction represents a slightly higher degree of address resident reluctance than is found in type 3 interactions, as although it is possible to identify shortcomings in the interviewer's persuasion strategies within type 4 interactions, we cannot automatically assume that the address resident would have given an interview had the shortcomings not been present.

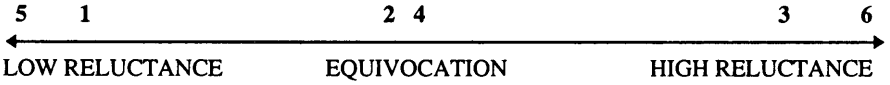
Interaction type 5 (Interview - no opportunity to persuade): These interactions are characterised by address residents who do not really require any degree of persuasion at all. They express no reluctance to participate, not even requiring information about interview length or topic etc. but simply agree to be interviewed more or less immediately after the initial introduction - sometimes even making a positive comment about the survey request. Often the interviewer provides the respondent with additional information

about what they are required to do *after* they have agreed to participate but before the interview has begun. They constitute what could be termed the 'hard-core' of respondents.

Interaction type 6 (Refusal - no opportunity to persuade): These interactions are characterised by address residents who are very brusque, sometimes rude, and always adamant that they do not want to even discuss the possibility of giving an interview. This type of interaction is perhaps what constitutes the real 'hard-core' of nonrespondents. Thankfully, this type of interaction is comparatively rare.

In summary then, beyond the final outcome (interview/refusal), the interaction type at a particular address is determined by two inter-related factors, the degree of reluctance of the address resident and the nature of the persuasion done by the interviewer. Figure 2, below shows the hypothesises positions of the six types of interaction on a dimension of 'address resident reluctance'.

Figure 2: Interaction types on dimension of address resident reluctance



The interaction type associated with the least reluctance on the part of the address resident is number 5 (interview - no opportunity to persuade). Next least reluctance is found in interactions of type 1 in which the interviewer need only employ 'baseline' skills in order to achieve the interview. At the opposite extreme of the reluctance dimension are interactions of type 6 - where address residents refuse without even presenting the interviewer with an opportunity to persuade them otherwise. Also at the high reluctance pole, are interactions of type 3. These interactions are characterised by respondents who are perhaps about as reluctant as those in type 6 interactions but are somewhat more willing to state their reasons for refusing.

Now, when assessing the scope for refusal reduction through improved interviewer doorstep technique, none of the interaction types described so far offer much hope. The two types at the low reluctance pole of the dimension, by definition, offer no scope for refusal reduction as they constitute only households which required at most baseline skill levels to achieve an interview. Likewise, the two types at the high reluctance pole of the dimension, offer little scope as they are defined as situations in which there appears to be no objective shortcomings in the interviewer's doorstep technique. Thus the real scope for

refusal reduction is located at the middle of the dimension, where the eventual outcome at an equivocating household may be determined by the way in which the interviewer responds to any reluctance exhibited by the address resident. The extent to which refusals may be reduced on a particular survey will be determined by the extent to which interviewer technique is able to 'shift' households from being type 4 interactions (refusal - could have done more) to being type 2 interactions (interview - above baseline skills).

3.2 The data used for classifying interaction types

There were 207 addresses at which at least one call was tape-recorded for the Political Tracking data. Of these, 33 had too much of the interaction missing (not recorded) to be reliably coded (coded 'other')[4] and four tapes were unfortunately lost during the transcription process. This resulted in 170 which were transcribed and coded. Of the146 tape-recorded addresses for the FRS, 15 contained insufficient data to be coded reliably (coded 'other'), and 131 were transcribed and coded.

The transcripts were all coded by one researcher. When the coding was complete, a second researcher was given a random selection of transcripts from each category. In all, fourteen transcripts were coded by the second researcher, covering a minimum of two from each category. On ten of the fourteen transcripts (71 percent), the same code was applied by both researchers. Of the remaining four discrepant transcript codes, all were resolved after discussion (three in favour of the first researcher's original coding and one in favour of the second researcher's original coding).

4 Results of the interaction type classification

The results are summarised in Figure 3. The most notable features of Figure 3 are that, in both surveys, the highest percentages are found in category 5 (where the respondent has simply invited the interviewer in without requiring any persuasion) and category 1 (where the interviewer needed only baseline skills to achieve the interview). The lowest proportions were found in category 6, where the respondent refuses and gives the interviewer no opportunity to persuade them. This is clearly very encouraging from the perspective of survey practitioners as it indicates both that the majority of people contacted are generally receptive to being interviewed and that the amount of people who are totally adamant that they will not co-operate is rather insignificant.

4 Some of these may actually be non-contacts. The unclear cases typically show a series of call attempts and have contact with another household member, but it is unclear whether we have the complete set of calls. In addition, there is no detailed outcome code available on the Political Tracking dataset to verify against.

Figure 3: Proportions of interactions within each code across surveys

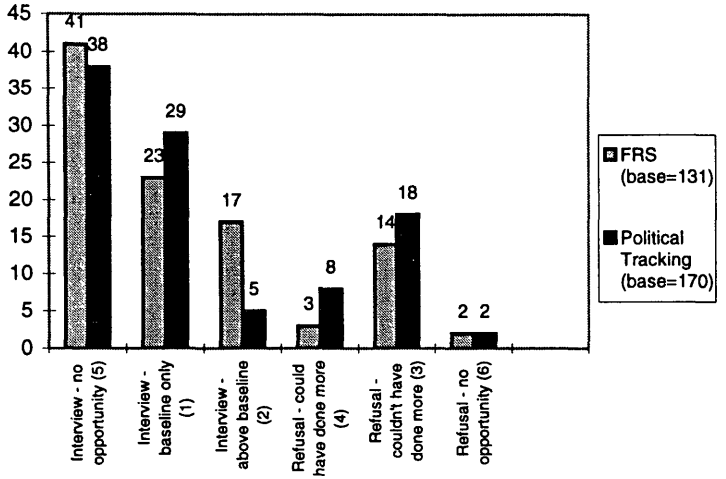


Figure 3 also shows that the distribution across the two surveys is fairly similar, the main differences being apparent across categories 1 - 4. Categories 2 and 4 are of particular interest as these are the ones where the skill of the interviewer can be the crucial factor in determining the final outcome at a particular address (this is discussed further below). It can be seen that the FRS data contains a higher proportion of interviews achieved by 'above baseline' skills (category 2) and a lower proportion of interactions where they could have done more to avoid a refusal (category 4). This is reflected in the overall difference in *co-operation rates* for the two surveys (successful interviews / (successful interviews + refusals)). Based on the figures in this analysis, the rates are 81 percent for the FRS and 72 percent for Political Tracking. These *co-operation rates* differ from the response rates of 72 and 61 percent respective, because non-contacts have been excluded, but also because cases in the 'other' category were excluded. For the FRS, 53 percent of these coded in 'other' were productive, while the corresponding figure for Political Tracking was 33 percent. The difference between these two percentages, however, is probably not as big as it may seem because the 'other' cases in the Political Tracking data may contain some non-contacts. Although 53 and 33 percent are distinctly lower than the co-operation rates for the coded cases, the percentages of 'other' cases are relatively small. There is also the broader issue of those cases which should have been taped but were not. These were slightly less likely than the taped cases to have been productive (for

example, 43 percent of this taping shortfall was productive on the FRS). We believe the overall impact of these cases of non-observation is relatively minor. Nonetheless, some caution should be used in generalising from the estimates based on this analysis to other studies, especially if these have different types of target populations or employ different types of interviewers.

Despite these caveats about the representativeness of the estimates, the relative differences between the FRS and Political Tracking studies remain. These are probably best explained by a few key survey differences. The FRS employs an advance letter and, as far as possible, a dedicated field-force who work on the FRS month in month out. Most interviewers working on the FRS have worked on it at least once before and all have received general and survey specific training. This means that it is likely that the FRS interviewers have had time to work out the best approach for them on this survey and are unlikely to hear novel objections from address residents to which they do not have a 'ready-made' response. There is also an element of self-selection occurring in the construction of the field force which is likely to have a beneficial effect on response rates. By this we mean that interviewers who do not like the survey will drop out while those who are comfortable with it (and thereby achieve higher response) will be keen to work as many months as possible. The positive effects on response that these types of organisational procedures can have is reflected in the fact that SCPR's response rate on the FRS has shown a steady increase since 1993. Although this effect incorporates the impact of a declining non-contact rate, refusal reduction has nevertheless played a significant role.

In contrast to this, Political Tracking began in 1994 and is scheduled to take place once every other year. Therefore due to its shorter history and less frequent administration, the interviewers working on the Political Tracking survey are likely to be less familiar with it and therefore less able to persuade address residents to participate when compared to the interviewers working on the FRS. The self-selection factor is also likely to play a far less significant role.

In summary then, despite the fact that, on the face of it, people are less likely to agree to give interviews on details of their income and expenditure than on their political attitudes, the FRS still achieves a higher response rate than the Political Tracking survey. This we feel can be attributed, at least in part, to the superior doorstep technique of the FRS interviewers revealed by this analysis. Under this model of survey response, many of the organisational/procedural survey effects on nonresponse are ultimately the same as those argued to derive directly from the interviewers' doorstep technique. This is because, if the macro level structural influences that differentiate the two surveys actually do affect response, then these must ultimately be manifested through individual interviewers on the

doorstep. By this reasoning the survey differences outlined above do not influence response rates *directly* but do so *indirectly* through enabling interviewers to improve their doorstep technique for each particular survey. Thus, the fact that the FRS is a long-standing (compared to Political Tracking), monthly, continuous survey with a 'core' field force *indirectly* affects response by influencing the *direct* effect of individual interviewers' doorstep techniques. In this light, it is important to note that in saying that the FRS interviewers have displayed superior doorstep technique in this study, we are not attributing this to the interviewers per se, nor simply to differences in training practices across organisations (although the SCPR interviewers who conduct the FRS do receive specific training in doorstep techniques) but predominantly, to specific differences in the natures of the two surveys under analysis.

Thus, the key objective from the perspective of minimising refusals must be to *simulate* these indirect influences by developing training schedules which provide interviewers with the same or similar effects as the ideal organisational/procedural ones. This is not to deny that there are issues common to most or all surveys that interviewers should be equally familiar with in order to accomplish a satisfactory doorstep technique on any given survey. Such 'pan-survey' issues include the subject of respondent confidentiality; the ethical implications of survey work; and the way individuals and households are selected. What must be achieved is an integration of this more general survey knowledge with an understanding of each specific survey. This is important as the extent to which the more general issues come up on the doorstep will be directly related to the nature of each individual survey. For example privacy/confidentiality is likely to be at its most pertinent when the survey deals with issues of income and expenditure as in the case of the FRS.

The lesson to be learned here, we feel, is that, in practical terms, the more familiar an interviewer is with the particular survey they are working on, the better their doorstep technique (and consequently their response rate) is likely to be on that survey. In training terms, the key implication is that interviewer briefings should concentrate, as much as possible, on familiarising interviewers with the nature of the survey they will be administering and to ensure that interviewers are aware of, and able to respond satisfactorily to, the most common questions that will be asked of them when they are trying to persuade reluctant respondents on the doorstep. Information on the most common 'pan-survey' respondent questions and statements can be acquired through reference to previous research in this area (chapter 4 of Campanelli et al. 1997, Morton-Williams 1993 and Couper 1995). Information on the more 'survey-specific' respondent behaviours can be obtained from interviewers who have experience of working on the particular survey (or on similar surveys if it is a one-off).

5 Conclusions

The main aims of this research have been to develop a typology of interviewer-address resident interactions and, from this typology, to determine the scope for reductions in the refusal component of nonresponse through improved interviewer persuasion strategies. The construction of the typology has therefore been driven by the requirement that differences between 'types' of interaction should be defined primarily by the degree of reluctance expressed by the respondent (and therefore the degree of persuasion required on the part of the interviewer).

Clearly, when attempting to establish the scope for reducing refusal rates our interest lies neither in interactions where no persuading is necessary (the hard-core of respondents) nor in those where no persuading is possible (the hard-core of nonrespondents). As we are interested in assessing the scope for reductions in refusal rates below *current* levels, we are also not really interested in interactions where only the most basic levels of persuasion are necessary to achieve an interview (given that the level of persuasion skill required in these interactions would already be expected of even the least experienced interviewers in organisations like SCPR and NOP). Nor should we be particularly interested in interactions where, although reluctant address residents allow interviewers an opportunity to persuade them to participate, there is nothing that the interviewer identifiably said or did wrong or even could have done differently to avoid the eventual refusal. When interviewers do everything expected of them (and sometimes more) throughout an interaction with a address resident and still fail to achieve an interview, we must assume that such interactions do not constitute an area where there is genuine scope for reductions in refusal rates through improved doorstep technique alone.

This leaves only two remaining interaction types from our coding frame. These are types 2 (interview - above baseline skills) and 4 (refusal - could have done more). It can be seen that these represent the interactions in which it is assumed that address residents are maximally ambivalent about participation. The scope for reducing refusal rates lies in shifting as many sample units as possible from type 4 interactions to type 2 interactions. In the two surveys under analysis the joint proportions of sample units falling into these two coding categories are nearly equivalent - 13% (Political Tracking) and 19% (FRS), but below the figures one might have naively imagined, as these suggest that the professional interviewer (at least in terms of the verbal aspects of the doorstep interaction) is only having an impact on about 1 in 5 cases, a small but nonetheless important percentage. (One mustn't forget, however, the baseline skills that professional survey interviewers easily employ to gain interviews among type 1 interactions. These interviews might not be so easily gained in other types of interview situations.)

The results also suggest that the FRS data has far more type 2 interactions than type 4 interactions (17%:3%) while the Political Tracking data has more equal proportions (5%:8%).

The reason for this discrepancy was argued to be a result of the design differences between the two surveys. Because the FRS is a monthly, continuous survey with a 'self-selecting' core field force, interviewers working on it are more likely to be knowledgeable about the survey and to be prepared for the sorts of respondent comments most frequently encountered on the survey. In comparison to this, Political Tracking is a newer survey which is conducted only biannually. Thus, in comparison to the FRS, the Political Tracking interviewers are likely to be less familiar with the exact nature of the survey they are trying to 'sell' and with the most frequently encountered respondent doorstep comments.

This suggests that there is not much scope for improvement in response rates via reductions in refusals in the FRS but that by concentrating on improving interviewer approaches, the Political Tracking survey could make a significant improvement in response rates by reducing the frequency of refusals. This can be done by simulating some of the positive organisational qualities from surveys like the FRS in the training programmes of other surveys such that interviewers are as familiar with the survey and what people on the doorstep are likely to say about it as they would be had they been working on a continuous survey for several months. As one interviewer put it

'You have to sell it to us first, before we can sell it to others.'

In addition interviewers can be instructed in the value of maintaining interaction to probe for opportunities to persuade and avoiding immediate participation decisions. They can also be encouraged, through discussion groups, to share their own experience and 'favourite' strategies.

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